

Murder, He Said - by Matt Pierard

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Murder story 1 - *By Neglect*

3:45 PM, January 202-, Liberty City, Miami.

Mavis Sinclair, 74, is stirring up pots of corn pone and greens on the two working burners of her apartment's kitchen stove, for an early dinner. A retired hotel housekeeper, she lives on social security and food assistance. She is in apartment 3A of the Sunview, where she has lived for twenty-two years.

In apartment 5B, the Williams children are home from school and watching a kid's show on PBS. In the kitchen, their mother, Charlene, assembles a snack of cookies and juice. Her husband, DeShawn, should be home from work in a couple of hours.

Amos and Berniece Adams are snuggling on the sofa in 4D listening to the local smooth jazz station. Both are recent retirees -- Amos from the city sanitation department, Berniece from ABC Daycare.

Leon Riley, stoned again on cheap wine and ganja, is sitting on the can in 1C. He's supposed to be the super, but the lazy 39-year-old can't be bothered right now by Mrs. Ruiz in 2A.

Juanita Ruiz is calling about the crack she has just noticed running down her bedroom wall. The 45-year-old office clerk is home with the flu. In the kitchen, her 16-year-old son, Tony, is listening to rap on his headphones while waiting for a couple of frozen Hot-pockets to heat up in the microwave.

3:57 PM

Sam, the Williams' dog, whines and barks at Charlene, pulling at her sweated arm.

"Somebody needs to make a doody!" pipes up Keshia, 7, from the living room.

"You talkin' 'bout yourself, girl?" her brother, Rashawn, 10, teases.

Charlene rolls her eyes and says, "Be right back. You two be good. Mwah!", making a kissy face.

She attaches the leash to her dog's collar and, after locking the door, heads down the hall to the elevator.

Mrs. Sinclair has sat down at her kitchen table to eat her simple meal. She hears popping noises from her ceiling, but ignores them.

"Probably rats," she mumbles.

Tony Ruiz brings his mom one of the warmed-up snacks and also notices the crack in the wall.

"It's getting bigger," Juanita says, worriedly.

The Adamses have entered their bedroom, kissing and undressing. They have been married 31 years and have three successful children, including Joseph, a Miami 911 operator.

Leon Riley unloads his burden, wipes, and flushes. As he goes to the sink to wash his hands, he hears a terrible rumbling.

4:03 PM

Sam barks hysterically and Charlene screams as the elevator car is hit with falling debris. They have already survived a four-story plunge as the rusty cables snapped. Both of them are uninjured, and they are bathed in dim emergency light.

"Keshia, Rashawn!" she wails.

Amos Adams has been knocked out by a fallen beam, but Berniece is on the other side of the bed fully aware. The bedroom wall and a portion of floor have vanished to her left. A few feet more and she'd be dangling off what's left of their bedroom floor. The beam and debris from the ceiling are blocking her access to her husband. Carefully but quickly, she rolls left and drops to the floor, crawling beneath the wrought-iron frame to reach Amos. On the floor near his bottom is his cell phone. She grabs it and dials for help.

"I am Berniece Adams, of Sunview Apartments, apartment 4D, 735 Palm Avenue, Miami," she states clearly to the operator on duty. "There has been a collapse of the building. My husband is hurt. Please, please hurry!"

4:05

Joe Adams has heard of his parent's predicament but remains calm. Police and firefighters are on the way. He responds to his mother,

"We're coming for you, Mom. What is your situation?"

"We're in the bedroom. The whole outside wall has fallen away, and part of the floor. I am beneath the bed and only have my slip on. I can feel the cold air coming in. Your father -- I don't know. I can feel a pulse in his thigh but... all I can see of him are his legs and butt. All he's got on are his shorts and socks. Oh Lord, Joe, please come soon!"

There is a lurching sound on the recording of their conversation.

"Mom, Mom, are you there?!"

"Yes. Something fell past, another piece of wall above and someone's furniture. I think I can hear the sirens. Oh, the sinking sun is so bri--"

Here, the recording stops. At 4:08 PM, the rest of the Sunview Apartments has fallen to the ground in a pile of rubble.

7:29 PM

Charlene Williams and her dog, Sam, are pulled up from the roof of the elevator. They are the sole survivors of the Sunview Apartments collapse.

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"Eight Residents of Miami Apartment House Die in Collapse"

Victims ranged in age from seven to seventy-four. 52 former residents, who were at work or otherwise outside of the building, are now homeless...

"Stalled School Bus Saves A Dozen Children"

Twelve children heading home to Sunview Apts saved from sure death by miracle breakdown.

"911 Operator's Parents Perish in Miami Disaster"

"Waitress and Her Dog Only Survivors of Sunview Collapse"

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DeShawn Williams sat dozing in a chair near his sleeping wife's hospital bed, her arms bandaged, a month after the disaster. He had found her that morning on the bathroom floor of a FEMA-supplied mobile home; she had cut her arms with a razor blade, the victim of lingering survivor's guilt. Sam had pulled the sleeping DeShawn out of bed by his arm, much like the way he had rescued his mistress; dogs suffer emotional trauma too. DeShawn had given the puppy Sam to Charlene on the first anniversary of their marriage eleven years earlier. Despite the loss of their children, he has never stopped loving her.

Maybe they could start a new family in another town. A salesman for a sports equipment franchise, he could relocate to their St. Louis office easily. This was his hometown, his folks still living in the same house he grew up in. He had last seen Keshia and RaShawn when he had dropped them off at school that final morning. Faith in God had gotten him through so far, but this incident -- Charlene's attempted suicide -- had shaken him greatly.

"Let her be, Lord, please," he had prayed in the hospital chapel, "I beg of you."

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In another part of Miami, Joseph Adams and his siblings, Rachel and Aaron, sat stone-faced during a public hearing. Defense was given by the attorney for Sunview's owners, the Weinstains, a wealthy family. Only their Christian upbringing kept the Adams siblings from thinking of racial stereotypes; they have suffered enough profiling in their own lives. Rachel teaches high school science; Aaron is a software engineer. Their folks scrimped and saved to make sure that their children went into respectable positions. Their lawyer, Elizabeth Alvarez, sat next to Joseph. The lawyer for the Weinstains, Brian Cohen, sat down near his clients, and the county officials respectfully took over conversation.

Mateo Ruiz, widower of Juanita and father of Tony, was not so respectful.

"Filthy, greedy, goddamned Jews!" he muttered audibly in Spanish. He sat between his grown daughters, Alicia and Teresa, who tried to calm him down. Alicia's husband, Eric Martinez, is a lawyer and is representing their family. He too admonished his father-in-law.

"Don't, Mateo. Go outside the room if you have to, but don't let them hear you make anti-Semitic remarks. It helps nobody."

Behind them sat Mrs. Sinclair's family -- her son, Arthur, and two grandsons, Jacob and Theo, who all also live in Miami. Arthur is a cable TV installer; Jacob manages a fast-food spot; Theo is an Uber driver. Their lawyer was an ambulance-chaser name Ed Tilley, who also represented Riley's parents, who lived in another state and hadn't the income to travel. Tilley kept them informed via his smartphone.

The attorney for the Williams family, Steven Jones, sat quietly to one side. He and his husband Robert attend the same progressive church as DeShawn and Charlene; he had last seen Keshia and RaShawn at Christmas during a church function. They were cute, smart kids, full of life and eager to learn. RaShawn wanted to be an astronaut, Keshia a nurse -- or a princess. Steven is determined to help his fellow parishioners out in any way he can.

Among the defense sat members of the Weinstein family, including patriarch Sidney, who had enough Spanish to know what Ruiz was mouthing. He had heard it before: he had been a landlord for over fifty years.

"Who the hell do these people think they are? Spics and schvartzes the lot of them!"

"Daddy," said his daughter Sylvia, "Shush, they'll hear you!"

"What, so I cut some corners. You had to go to college, didn't you? A degree in French Literature, hah! What the hell kinda job you gonna get with that? What kinda man you going to marry? A fruitcake in a beret, that's who!"

"Daddy, stop saying these things. Oliver is not gay, believe me. We just weren't compatible, that's all."

"Compatible, hah! Once he learned I expected a son-in-law to do two things: give me grandsons and support my daughter in a way she was accustomed to. Big fat zero on both counts!"

"Would you two kindly pipe down," said Cohen, under his breath.

Alex Weinstein, to his father's right, whispered to Sidney, "What do you mean you cut corners, Dad? I know these people, they're hard-working family men and women..."

"Shove your bleeding-heart bullcrap, Alexander," muttered the old man. "I knew I shouldn't have hired you as my go-between. You're too goddamn sentimental, just like your mother. Where is she when I need her -- here by my side? No, at home with a sick headache! She sends me you for some kind of substitute. You!" Here, the old fellow lapsed into Yiddish.

"Daddy!" cried out a blushing Sylvia, "My ears are burning!"

"Sidney, I'm warning you," growled Cohen.

"Awright, awright, quit yer bellyaching!"

Lawyers Alvarez, Martinez, Tilley, and Jones had each heard all or part of this conversation. Three are disgusted, one is privately enjoying the show. All eventually gird themselves to protect their client's dignity and get the best settlement they can, unless they can convince the DA to indict the Weinsteins for multiple manslaughter. Sadly, they know that the neighborhood in which the Sunview was located is not considered in the same class with the denizens of the condo collapse not so long ago in Surfside. A willfully-ignorant governor and largely-racist state legislature does not help, despite the fact that most of the victims had largely been self-sufficient, respectable people, and three of them children under eighteen.

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Murder Story 2: *Self-Obsessed.*

Ben pulled on his jeans and boots, shouldered his backpack, and walked into the small town, where he bought bread, honey, and other foodstuffs. He walked back the two miles home, an attractive blond man of brawny build. Forty-five, nineteen years of which he had spent working in the forest service. He lived in a three-room cabin set five acres back from the main road.

He put away most of the food and made a sandwich of honey and some margarine from the small refrigerator under the kitchen counter. He brought it to the beefy naked man lying in his bed. As the other man ate, Ben undressed and joined him. They had sex for a couple of sweaty hours, then got up to have a shower together. They dried each other off and dressed, then sat on the sofa opposite the kitchen and cuddled.

They had met through a personals ad in a men's magazine. The chubbier fellow had left his wife and home for this younger, more virile man. Ben caressed the older man's head and neck, urging it down again. The man undid Ben's fly and fellated him for the third time that afternoon. After Ben came and had withdrawn from the man's wet mouth, he throttled him and pushed his dead body onto the floor. After stripping him bare and wrapping him up in the bedsheet, he carried him out back and buried him with the others.

Ben had taken a little longer to achieve this goal because his prey was special to him. A sad excuse for a man, Justin Samuels had remained married to his fat, nagging wife "for the sake of their daughter". His previous kills had been greedy, lazy queens. Dispatching them was a pleasure, as they weren't half the man Justin had been, but it was time for Justin to go. Without his anti-depressants, Justin had become increasingly suicidal. Damn that woman -- if females didn't repel him completely, Ben would have gladly seduced and destroyed her too.

Ben next set about ridding himself of Justin's few belongings. In his domineering fashion, Ben had told his prey to only bring one backpack full of clothes and personal items. His first victim had defied this order and brought two suitcases! That had been Donald Johnson; Ben had garotted him before a week had passed. Ben gathered up Justin's clothing into a bundle and drove his Jeep up to a city in Georgia, where he donated them to Goodwill. From this town he also mailed a package addressed to Justin's only child, Susan. It contained Justin's sole luxury item, his mp3 player, and a hand-written note by Justin, okayed by Ben.

"Darling Susan, This will be the last you'll hear from me. I am at peace at last. Please enjoy these songs that we used to listen to together when we were away from Her. Have a good, meaningful life. I love you, kiddo. Dad."

What Ben didn't know, ignorant of modern technology as he was, was the fact that the player had a recording device. This ultimately was his downfall. Apparently, Justin had gone to a secluded place to record a trickling stream, birdsong, and a steady breeze with no other motive

apparently than just to have the sounds on his player. Twenty minutes in, however, a man's voice could be heard shouting "Justin, where are you?!!", at which point Justin muttered a curse and shut off the recorder. An FBI audio forensics specialist isolated both the bird's chirping and the man's voice. The birds were native to a specific part of Florida, which he narrowed down with the help of a local ornithologist. Justin's location, despite the fact that the package had been sent from a bogus address in Valdosta, GA, was somewhere in Osceola National Forest, near Ocala, FL.

As a forest ranger, Ben had occasionally been interviewed by radio reporters on various stories, like fire season, animal variety, and, ironically, missing persons, such as wayward hikers. He shunned any TV interviews for fear that his physical appearance might ring a bell; in his ads, he featured a faceless photo of himself packed into tight jeans and an open flannel shirt, which showed off his muscled chest. Ben had a distinctly masculine voice which people tended to remember about him, which is why radio news people liked to interview him. Unbeknownst to Ben, this had earned him a small following on social media, made up largely of lonely women, another irony. They called him Backwoods Ben. After he was caught, the tabloid press had a field day.

"Brutal Ben, a Bear of a Killer! Five men seduced and slaughtered by Backwoodsman."

Ben would time his conquests with vacations, placing the ad months ahead to winnow out the trash responses. Many responders only wanted nude pics, including a few professional pornographers. Ben rejected these all with typewritten responses, either "fuck you, pervert" to the photo queens, and "sorry, not interested" to the pros. Serious leads led to meetings at gay bars in the nearest cities. The few just looking for a casual hookup he either rejected outright or took on for a few hours of pleasure, mostly never contacting them again. These men were his physical equals, also in control of their daily lives. The two he continued corresponding to had no idea what Ben had been up to in the woods.

"Technically, he was a hot lay, but emotionally distant. It was like getting fucked by a robot. But we liked each other, both into hunting and fishing, the great outdoors. We stayed in touch for a year or two, but he rejected offers to go on trips together at wilderness resorts -- and never asked me to come stay with him. He was a loner, he said ultimately, and I stopped hearing from him. Mail came back 'box closed, no forwarding address'; I guess it's just as well, right?"

The other man, who also remains anonymous, says pretty much the same thing, though they did spend a weekend together at a gay-owned New England hunting lodge on a lake.

"Intense but impersonal sex, over when we kissed. He avoided the other guests, so I had him all to myself. We talked about nature, self-sufficiency, stuff like that. He said he was a logger but I kind of knew he was lying. The only time his sense of fun came out was when we dove off the dock bare-assed and played around in the water. I just can't get my mind around how or why he did those evil things to those sad men."

Ben's days of hunting human prey ended mere days after the recording of his voice went public via airplay on American Public Radio. Within hours, people from social media were contacting their local radio and police stations.

"My wife says she recognizes that voice, that Backwoods Ben fella."

"It's him, Backwoods Ben. I'd know that sexy voice anywhere!"

Ben was walking into town for supplies the day he was nabbed. Surrounded by sheriff's deputies and FBI agents, he tried to run into the woods, but was tackled by a bull of a man. Backpack ripped off, his wrists were wrenched behind his back and handcuffed. As they pulled him up, he cursed and grunted like a wild man, completely unrepentant. He currently sits in the country jail, in solitary under observation. His only publicly available comment to date:

"I was doin' society a favor, man."

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Murder Mystery 3: *Violation*

I fell to the floor after being struck and stayed down, as I was told to do by Brother Timothy. I lay there and watched him violate my best friend in the most brutal and intimate ways. Brother Timothy then left us alone on the cold stone floor, a few feet apart, Phillip naked and bleeding. We had only shared a fleeting kiss before the priest discovered us and flew into a jealous rage. We were only twelve years old then.

Hours later, Brother Timothy was found hanging from an oak branch in the woods.

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Twenty years later, in 1992, I received a note from Phil -- as he now called himself -- asking to meet for drinks. I had not heard from him since the incident, as his parents had removed him from St. Ignatius shortly after. Outside of an interview with the police in my father's presence regarding Phillip's rape, I was not called to testify at the subsequent trial brought by his folks against the school. My parents were quietly paid off by the diocese to make no more of the matter. Thankfully, my mother insisted that I be homeschooled until my senior year, and then I went to a public school where I thrived. Although I had stopped attending church by age fifteen, the diocese further tried to buy my silence with a scholarship to Notre Dame. Much to my father's dismay, I rejected it for Florida State, then Stetson. I began my small law practice and did pro bono work on the side.

Phil, on the other hand, had not done so well. He got into drugs for awhile, hustled, did gay porn, but somehow avoided HIV.

"I'm a cocksucker and I'm really good at it," he snickered over beers at El Goya, the old Ybor drag palace. "Bro Tim was a great teacher, y'know. His was short and uncut, an easy one to train on--"

"Enough!" I said, holding my hands up and pushing his foul words away. "Too much information, Phil."

He was short and slim, his long blond hair tied back in a ponytail. The sweetness of his face was long gone but there was still some beauty in it. He could still feel Phillip's soft lips and firm hand on the tumescence in his trousers.

"You're remembering. Good," Phil said, smiling in his knowing way, unaffected. "The thing is, some guy wants to reopen the case. He thinks Tim was murdered. I'm willing to testify if, well, you represent me."

I was stunned but my professional head took over.

"I can't -- I was a witness too, conflict of interest. But I can recommend someone for you. Sara Alvarez. She's been active in the child sex abuse cases of late--"

"Of late'," Phil snickered. "Man, you sound like that guy on 'L.A. Law', Hamlin's Hairy!"

Any desire I might have had for Phil that night shriveled away. I got up to leave. "I'm sorry but that's the best I can offer you, Phil."

"Phillip to you, Mr. Bigtime Lawyer! Whyn't you go--" he shrieked suddenly, but I was moving through a crowd of queens and dancers. One obese character done up like Liz Taylor felt me up, but stepped aside when I glared at him. Really not my scene. Although I was out, I veered more to the professional men's gay clubs -- tweed suits and Aramis. I went home alone.

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Two years later, I stood in Garden of Memories at a small granite marker inscribed with Phillip's name and vital dates. "Sleep in Peace, My Son" was incised below them. He had died in hospice, HIV having caught up with him in his final downward spiral. The murder case never came to fruition and Phil, through hard drugs and unsafe sex, had simply given up.

I could have killed the journalist who hyped Brother Timothy's murder, but "Joe Del Vecchio" simply vanished. He had written a few muck-raking articles for Creative Loafing, then blew town, presumably for NYC, but I was never able to track him down, not even via the early internet.

I consulted Alvarez, who was by then working for the Pinellas County DA's office, SVU division. She recalled having a conversation with Del Vecchio in '92, but none with Phil.

"I think he was just looking to stir some shit up, Mike," she told me, sounding busy over the phone. "Some of these ex-choirboys have legitimate claims, but I think this guy had a beef with the Catholic Church in general. I had more solid cases to deal with so... I kind of blew him off."

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The millenium came to a close quietly, with beautiful images from Sydney Harbor as dawn rose over the Pacific Ocean. My office had doubled in size and I was very busy. I met a decent guy finally, Greg, and he's now my husband. We got through 9/11 together and the long ensuing war, then the blissful Obama era. It wasn't until that thing occupied the White House that the old memories started cropping up. We had been married a year when the Beast showed up. People started coming forward with horror stories about him, and other well-known lowlifes. It also began anew with the Church, including the Bay Area. Men came forward about the abuses at St. Ignatius and about Brother Timothy.

His body was exhumed and his remains suggested strangulation by hands, not rope. A death-bed confession by the school caretaker led the police back to the long-rumored murder. I remembered Tom Riley, a good man, devout but kind to us kids who were different. He hated only one man as it turned out -- Brother Timothy. He knew what was going on but the diocese threatened to fire him, a man with a crippled daughter to raise. So he said nothing for years, since 1965. So Phil wasn't the first victim.

"Snuck up behind him with my hands raised. I seen what he done to that boy, Phillip. I cleaned that poor boy up, told his friend to stay put, and I followed that evil sumbitch with my hands up an' ready. Hoisted him up on that branch. Lord God forgive me for my sins..."

God, I wish he had lived longer, just to be able to testify for him in court -- it would have been an honor!

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Murder 4 - *Superiority*

The black-and-white cat swam frantically to the other side of the algae-tinted pool, climbed out and ran into a copse to hide. It shook off some of the water and began re-grooming itself as he had been doing minutes before. At that earlier moment, it had begun to rid itself of a combination of blood and cocaine staining the silvery-gray carpet. I felt it was better that he eat algae than gory poison, which is why I scooped him up and tossed him into the pool.

There were three bodies -- two women and a man. All were black. One of the women had been beaten up and raped, by the looks of her. Her neon green cocktail dress was hiked up to her waist, her matching panties shucked down, exposing a vagina smeared with blood and semen. The other woman had wet herself in fear -- she was heavier and less attractive in a bright yellow dress, a bullet hole drilled above her left breast. The man was older, late 40's; he sat next to Yellow Dress, dressed in sports jacket, slacks, and a partially-unbuttoned silk shirt, all in shades of brown. He had been shot both in his crotch and between the eyes.

On the coffee table before them were blurred lines of coke, rolled up \$100 bills, a half-full bottle of vodka, and three tumblers, two knocked over. Along the living room walls were framed photos of the man with athletes, musicians, and politicians. Most of them were also black. Also framed was an athletic jersey and photos of the man in his 20's holding a football and a couple of trophies. Where the real items once evidently sat were bare pedestals. Commemorative rings had been roughly yanked from the man's dead fingers, leaving abrasions on his light-brown skin. He had been killed first before the prettier woman had been assaulted.

The victims were Victor Carter, 43; Elaine Thomas, 40; and Sonya Terrell, 27. Both women worked for an escort service based in Tampa. Carter had played for Cleveland initially, his glory days. He had been traded to Tampa at age 32 and had retired at age 35. He co-owned a fairly-popular sports bar in the University area. Carter had never married but had a son, Terence, back in Ohio. The youth, now 15, lived with his forty-one-year-old mother, Sheryl Lewis, a regionally-popular jazz singer. Carter paid for the boy's child support regularly but they were not close, as the youth was openly gay, a "disease" he blamed on Ms. Lewis, who is white. Ironically, a photo of a younger Terence holding a kitten version of the cat I had rescued sat on an entertainment unit with other family photos. I supposed Carter still loved his son in his own way.

I have been taking crime scene photos for over thirty years but this was one of the worst. The girl lay on the floor parallel to the coffee table. Her open eyes stared glassily at Carter, one ringed with bruising. Her nose was broken and bloody. Strong hand-marks were visible around her throat. Her arms were splayed out, also bruised; she was lighter-skinned than Carter. Ms. Thomas was dark brown, and was otherwise unmarked; her eyes were the only ones closed. Carter lay back, brown eyes staring blindly at the ceiling. There are, thankfully, no signs of predation by the tomcat, Splotchy, so-named by Terence Carter. The cat had originally been a stray found behind Carter's bar. The trio had been pronounced dead an hour earlier that Sunday morning, after neighbors heard gunshots and screaming.

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Sheryl didn't hear about Victor until later that day. She wasn't surprised that he had died violently -- she believed that it was due to the rough crowd he had begun hanging out with, which had driven her home to Cleveland. She lived with her folks for awhile until she found a decent two-bedroom flat she could afford for herself and Terence. That had been four years ago. Drugs taken to alleviate the pain from football injuries had led to drugs for pleasure. When

Victor began using it for sex that lasted long into the night, leaving her so bruised and exhausted to the point that she neglected her own son, she packed him up and split.

How would she tell Terence; how would he react? As it turned out, the internet beat her to it.

"How, son?" she asked angrily, "Who told you?!"

"It's all over social media, Mom," he said, glumly. "First it was rumors, someone has a police scanner. They knew this 'hood. Then the TV news people showed up, talking to D-dad's neighbors..."

Sheryl stopped him with a hug, and he cried at her shoulder, "God, Mom, why?"

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Victor's parents, who he'd moved down to a nice retirement village in St. Pete, were contacted first. A spinster daughter, Julia, lived with them. She had informed Sheryl, as Julia's mother was inconsolable. Julia's father had early-onset dementia but understood that his boy was dead. He sat stoically on the sofa, one arm stiffly around his weeping wife as their daughter made the necessary calls.

Julia called her older brother, a businessman named Frederick, and their younger sister, Natalie. They would each be flying down from Cincinnati and Atlanta as soon as possible. While she had no problem with Fred's offer to take over funeral arrangements, she dreaded the appearance of his busybody wife, Jeane. Natalie, a kindergarten teacher, would be a comfort and her lawyer husband, James, could help Fred. Julia, a bookkeeper, would deal with expenses. Each of her siblings had one child -- Fred's Janelle, 18; Natalie's Todd, 8; and Terence. She would have to gird herself as Auntie Julia at a less pleasant time than the holidays.

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Albert Braxton took the news of his business partner's murder with suppressed delight. Victor's addiction had been eating up profits. The Ball Club was consistently in the black, but just barely. Carter's main asset was star power -- a popular ex-football hero and a chick magnet. Braxton was plump and plain, a family man in his 50's with twenty-five years in the bar biz. He would have to woo another ex-jock to replace Carter if he wanted to continue his career. He looked forward to Carter's funeral -- there were sure to be some worthy contenders in the pews.

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Sonya Terrell's mother Angela screamed when the police detective told her the news. She then bit the side of her hand to calm down as she wept. The wife of an oil-rigger, who was currently off the shores of Louisiana, she had learned to deal with grief after an initial shock to her

psyche. Joe Terrell had survived a direct hit to the oil platform from a Category 2 hurricane two years earlier. Although he had cut Sonya out of his life because of her profession, he would have to be told. From a room down the hall, Sonya's toddler, Tamala, cried for Mama.

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Elaine Thomas had no family to speak of. The madam of Elite Escorts took the information calmly and said a prayer to herself.

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Marcus Tolliver was on the run. His clothes were stained with Sonya's blood. He had considered taking Tamala with him, but the police had shown up at the Terrell's apartment house. He was on US 301 heading north to Georgia, and beyond. Should he head for Canada or Mexico? Victor Carter's bloodied rings were shoved deep in his jeans' pockets; Carter's trophies were in the trunk. In his hyped-up state, he thought he could hock them for their gold if he had to. A wannabe athlete, now twenty-five, he felt he was in Carter's class. The majors didn't agree. He'd been farmed out to a lesser team for grunt work and pay.

Carter has been his idol in high school. He had sat on a barstool in The Ball Club every weekend, watching the man carouse with fans and women. When Carter had walked in one evening with Sonya on his arm, Tolliver had freaked and followed them back to Victor's house. He hadn't known that Elaine was there waiting for them, setting up the coke and liquor for what was supposed to be a hot threesome, as Elaine was one of Victor's favorites. What she had lacked in looks, she made up with pure sensuality, which ultimately proved to be her undoing. She had sat there, stoned and in shock after Victor's murder and watched her friend be brutalized until Marcus noticed her and ended it for her.

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